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OCAL COUNCILLORS

Alice Bloch

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FOUNDATION

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Alice Bloch

INTRODUCTION

THE CONSTITUENTS of the 448 local councils of England and Wales are represented by about 21,000 councillors. The authorities they serve on vary greatly in size, political control, level of spending and electoral representation. The time devoted to council business also varies between different authorities and between individual councillors within authorities. But all elected members have three important roles which are defined by the Audit Commission: as politicians (whether or not they wear a party label), as representatives of the electorate and as local authority managers (1).

The skills required to be an effective local councillor are complex and demanding. The Audit Commission has maintained that more and more local councillors have stood down in recent years, some after only a short time in office. Thus it would appear that councillors are resigning from the job just as they become experienced, only to be replaced by a new group of inexperienced councillors. This pattern has important implications for the representation of the electorate and the management of local authority business.

The aim of this study was to find out the reasons for the turnover of local authority councillors in England and Wales. More specifically, the research aimed to produce detailed information on the reasons why councillors chose not to stand for re-election. At a time when the structure and management of local government is under review (2), the experience of ex-councillors should be an important contribution to the debate. Thus the survey tried to find out what made councillors decide they no longer wanted to participate in the running of local government.

Background

The design of the research was influenced by work carried out for the Maud Committee in 1964 (3), the Robinson Committee in 1976 (4) and the Widdicombe Committee in 1985 (5). Although

these surveys were concerned primarily with recruitment, remuneration and the general experience of councillors rather than their retirement from council duties, many of the issues overlap. The previous surveys also provide a benchmark from which to compare some of the personal characteristics and experiences of councillors while in office.

Work undertaken in 1981 by Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher on retiring members from four South-West counties was also relevant to this study (6). They found that the commonest reasons for standing down from council duties were old age and ill health. Other factors mentioned were the effects on employment and family life, the time-consuming nature of the job, general disenchantment with what they saw as the excessive party politicisation of local government and with interference by central government in local affairs.

In order to examine the reasons that led councillors to stand down, three main themes were explored: the personal characteristics of ex-councillors, the level of participation in councillor duties and the political dimension of the councillor role.

Research design

A sample of local authorities in England and Wales was selected in such a way as to ensure representation by type of authority (London, county, metropolitan and district) and political control (Conservative, Labour or no overall control). A third dimension also taken into account was the electoral system. Some authorities elect the whole of the council every four years (London, county and 63 per cent of the district councils), while others operate a system where one-third of the council seats are contested in rotation every year excepting the year in which the county elections are held (metropolitan and 37 per cent of the district councils).

Once the 92 participating authorities had been systematically sampled (7), the *Municipal Yearbook* was used to obtain the names and addresses of councillors who did not reappear on the list the year after the previous local election. To draw a reasonably up-to-date sample of ex-councillors for those district councils which

hold elections every four years, local newspapers were examined after the May 1991 elections. All the ex-councillors were identified and once again systematic methods were used to obtain the final sample.

After a pilot survey in March 1991, the postal survey of 851 ex-councillors took place between April and July 1991. The response to the survey was as follows:

Table 1: Response

	Number	*Percentage of eligible respondents*
Total selected	*851*	
Dead wood (gone away/dead/ not known)	75	
Total eligible	*776*	
Completed questionnaires	519	67
Returned but incomplete (too ill/still a councillor/did not wish to participate)	44	6
No reply	213	27

The sampling procedure was designed to produce roughly equal numbers of ex-councillors by type of authority and political control. Table 2 overleaf shows the distribution of the sample by type of authority and political control. (The total percentages do not always add up to 100 because of rounding.)

In addition to the postal survey, personal interviews were carried out with a small number of respondents who had stood down. Five women and four men from different types of authorities were interviewed. The interviews allowed some of the themes to be examined in more detail.

Table 2: The sample by type of authority and political control

column percentages
base number: 519

	Labour majority	*No overall control*	*Conservative majority*
County councils	14	21	21
London boroughs	19	25	23
Metropolitan districts	34	9	8
Districts which elect in thirds	17	26	22
Districts which elect the whole council	17	18	26
Total number	*197*	*163*	*159*

Note: A larger number of Labour ex-councillors were sampled in the metropolitan districts as there were few councils with a Conservative majority or no overall control.

The report

The report is in five parts. Chapter 1 examines the personal characteristics of ex-councillors and the level of participation in council duties. Chapter 2 assesses councillor turnover, while Chapter 3 looks at the reasons why, where applicable, people chose to resign from the council. Chapter 4 examines people's experiences as local authority councillors and considers some of the organisational changes that were suggested by ex-councillors. Chapter 5 is the conclusion.

References

1 Audit Commission, 'We can't go on meeting like this: The changing role of local authority members', *Audit Commission Management Papers*, No 8, September 1990.

2 The consultation papers are:
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6 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'Disillusion, age and frustration - why councillors are calling it a day', *Local Government Chronicle,* 9 October 1981, pp. 1041-1042.

7 See D. A. deVaus, *Surveys in Social Research,* George Allen and Unwin, 1986.

CHAPTER 1

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND WORKING EXPERIENCE OF EX-COUNCILLORS

THE MAUD REPORT stated that '... members do not reflect the population in terms of age, sex, occupation or education' (1). Although the surveys undertaken by Maud in 1964 and Widdicombe in 1985 were predominantly of councillors in office, Maud did undertake a small survey of ex-councillors which allowed limited comparisons over time. Many of the trends between Maud, Robinson and Widdicombe, such as the characteristics of councillors, have been shown to continue in this survey. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that ex-councillors do not differ from the councillor population in general.

Personal characteristics of councillors

There has been a steady increase in the proportion of female councillors over the last 25 years. In 1964, 10 per cent of all councillors were female, increasing to 19 per cent in 1985 and 26 per cent among the sample of ex-councillors in 1991. Since there was little difference between the proportion of male and female councillors and ex-councillors in 1964, the indication is that the gender imbalance has declined slightly since 1985 (2). In 1991, 49 per cent of the population in England and Wales were male so there is still an over-representation of men as local council members (3).

Previous surveys undertaken by Maud in 1964, Robinson in 1976 and Widdicombe in 1985 found that councillors were older than the population at large (4). Table 3 compares the ages of ex-councillors in 1991 with the ages of the population.

Table 3: Ages of ex-councillors and the general population

column percentages

	Ex-councillors	*Population estimates 1991*
Age		
34 or under	8	31*
35-44	27	19
45-54	22	15
55-64	17	14
65-74	19	12
75 or over	6	9
No response	1	-
Base number	*519*	

Source: *Annual Abstract of Statistics* 1991, Central Statistical Office, HMSO. Figures for England and Wales

* Population estimates for total population are for those aged 19 and over.

A higher proportion of ex-councillors were self-employed (18 per cent) or retired (25 per cent) than in the adult population (8 per cent and 18 per cent respectively). A smaller proportion of ex-councillors were looking after the home and family (4 per cent), than in the population (14 per cent) (5).

In 1991, 86 per cent of ex-councillors were home-owners, a much higher proportion than within the population (63 per cent). This is in line with the trends found in previous surveys where, despite the increase in the proportion of owner-occupiers within the general population, the rate of increase among councillors had been at a faster rate and far exceeded that in the population (6). Conversely, fewer ex-councillors rented their homes from the council (5 per cent) than members of the general population (26 per cent) (7). Councillors continue to be drawn from the more affluent sections of society.

Over three-quarters of ex-councillors were married or living with a partner, which is more than within the population (59 per cent) (8). As Widdicombe stated, '... this is primarily a reflection of the different age structure of councillors - more in those age

groups are likely either to be married or to have been married' (9). There was, however, a difference between the marital status of men and women ex-councillors: 84 per cent of men and only 66 per cent of women were married. This is probably due, in part, to the domestic responsibilities of married women which make it more difficult for them to cope with councillor work as well as a family.

Table 4 shows that the age and working status of ex-councillors also varies by sex. Women councillors tended to be slightly younger, less likely to be retired or self-employed and more likely to be working part-time or looking after the home and/or family than their male counterparts.

Table 4: Sex of ex-councillors by age and activity status

column percentages

	Male	*Female*
Age		
34 or under	7	11
35-44	27	29
45-54	23	21
55-64	14	24
65-74	22	11
75 and over	6	5
Base number	*380*	*131*
Working status		
Working - full-time	45	40
- part-time	3	17
Self-employed	21	9
Retired	27	17
Looking after home/family	-	14
Unemployed	3	1
Other	2	2
Base number	*381*	*132*

Political affiliation

Respondents were asked what political party they represented the last time they were elected into office. There was little difference in the proportion of Conservative (38 per cent) and Labour candidates (37 per cent). As expected, there were fewer Liberal Democrats (14 per cent) or members of other parties such as Plaid Cymru or the Social Democrats (6 per cent). The main change since Widdicombe was the large drop in 'independent' (non-party) candidates from 15 per cent to 3 per cent. This indicates the increasing trend for local government to be run along national party lines.

Table 5 shows that age is linked to political allegiance. Younger people were more often Labour candidates and older people more often Conservative candidates. Independents and other party candidates have been grouped into an 'other' category because the numbers were too small to allow separate analysis.

Table 5: Age of ex-councillors by party or non-party affiliation

column percentages
base number: 509

	Under 45	*45 to 54*	*55 to 64*	*65 and over*
Conservative party candidate	21	37	53	53
Labour party candidate	55	35	20	28
Liberal Democrat party candidate	13	19	19	10
Other	11	9	8	9
Base number	*183*	*113*	*86*	*127*

Of the ex-councillors who were self-employed, 57 per cent were Conservative candidates against 19 per cent Labour candidates. Likewise a higher proportion of those who were retired were Conservatives (48 per cent) than were Labour (31 per cent).

Councillor experience

The length of councillor service ranged from less than one year to 46 years of continuous service. A large proportion had served for only one complete term, that is four years, in office (34 per cent) or two complete terms (16 per cent). Table 6 shows the length of service of ex-councillors.

Table 6: Length of service by ex-councillors

base number: 519

	Percentage
4 years or less	43
5 to 8 years	22
9 to 16 years	17
More than 16	15
Not answered	3

Length of service varied by sex and age. A higher proportion of women (58 per cent) than men (40 per cent) had served one term or less in office. Conversely, a higher proportion of men (18 per cent) than women (8 per cent) had served on the council for more than 16 years. Table 7 shows that the lower the age the higher the turnover after only one term or less in office.

Table 7: Age of ex-councillors by length of service

column percentages
base number: 500

	Under 45	*45 to 54*	*55 to 64*	*65 and over*
Length of service				
4 years or less	66	42	35	21
5 to 8 years	24	27	23	17
9 to 16 years	9	21	20	28
More than 16 years	1	10	22	35
Base number	*181*	*111*	*82*	*126*

To give an indication of their level of participation in council duties, people were asked how many committees or sub-committees (if any) they served on during their last year in office and whether they had held a council office.

Most people had served on more than one committee or sub-committee. For instance, 43 per cent had served on either one to two or three to four committees and 10 per cent had served on five committees or more. Only 3 per cent of ex-councillors did not serve on any committees while 13 per cent had not served on any sub-committees during their last term in office (see Appendix 1, Table A1).

The committee system dominates the policy-making machinery of local government. As Stewart wrote:

> The main formal setting for the work of the councillor is the service committee, or a committee concerned with overall policy and resources ... councillors work with and through the instruments with which they are provided. The main instrument is the committee system. That system dominates the working of the authority (10).

Respondents were asked whether they had held a council office - as mayor, leader or committee chair, for example - during their last year or last term of service. Most people held an office although Table 8 shows that ex-councillors had participated less in council duties during their last year than during their last term in office. (Respondents were asked to indicate all the offices held, so the percentages in Table 8 add up to more than 100 per cent.)

Table 8: Council offices held by last year and last term of service

column percentages
base number: 506

	Last year of office	*Last term of office (four years)*
Leader	1	2
Chair/mayor	2	5
Committee chair	19	28
Sub-committee chair	25	30
Group leader	6	8
Other group office holder	16	21
Any other/s*	18	20
None of these	39	26

* These include: junior whip, committee vice-chair and opposition spokesperson.

The sex and age of ex-councillors affected some of the council offices held. Men were more likely to be group leaders, as were people aged 55 to 64 years old (see Appendix 1, Tables A2 to A5). Length of service proved to be particularly influential in the propensity to hold council offices. Table 9 shows that councillors serving their first term in office were least likely to hold a position of authority on the council. A similar pattern existed for councillors during their last year of service (see Appendix 1, Table A6).

Ex-councillors were asked roughly how many hours per month they spent on a range of council duties during their last year as an elected member. Although the question was asked in a similar format to Widdicombe, direct comparisons must be interpreted with caution for two reasons. First the 1991 question was not an exact replica of the 1985 one. Secondly, the 1991 study was concerned with ex-councillors rather than serving members which meant that in some instances respondents were recalling activities undertaken two years earlier. Table 10 compares the average time spent on a range of councillor activities in 1985 and 1991 and suggests that the total amount of time spent on council duties has increased (11).

Table 9: Council offices held during last term of office by length of service

base number: 506

	4 years or less	*5 to 8 years*	*9 to 16 years*	*More than 16 years*	*All*
Leader	-	3	1	8	2
Chair/mayor	1	4	7	14	5
Committee chair	17	36	38	41	29
Sub-committee chair	24	33	36	40	31
Group leader	4	12	9	13	8
Other group office-holder	22	22	23	13	21
Any other/s*	23	19	13	19	20
None of these	36	19	18	15	26

* These include: junior whip, committee vice-chair and opposition spokesperson.

Table 10: Time spent by ex-councillors on a range of council duties: 1985, 1991

base number 1991: 488
base number 1985: 1557

	Average hours per month	
	1985	*1991*
Attending meetings (council, committee, sub-committee)	21	24
Preparing for meetings, including meeting officers on official business	18	17
Travelling to and from meetings	7	8
Dealing with electors' problems and pressure groups	13	15
Attending party meetings relevant to council duties	5	7
Meeting external organisations*	8	-
Public consultation meetings*	2	-
Other**	-	11
Total hours per month	*74*	*82*

* Meeting external organisations and public consultation not included in 1991 study.
** 'Other' not included in 1985.

Councillors from larger authorities spent more time than others attending meetings of the council and its committees and sub-committees. Ex-councillors from counties spent an average of 29 hours per month attending meetings, while those in London and the metropolitan districts spent 27 hours and 28 hours per month respectively. These compare with an average of 18 hours spent by district councillors.

Ex-councillors had spent, on average, 60 per cent of their total time on council business attending, preparing for and travelling to and from official meetings of the council and its committees and sub-committees. This is similar to the proportion of time found by Widdicombe in 1985 (62 per cent).

The amount of time spent on council duties varied according to the type of authority, the political balance, the political party and whether or not the councillor worked. Councillors in metropolitan areas had spent an average of 103 hours per month on council activities; this was more than councillors in London (88 hours), the counties (88 hours) and the shire districts (64 hours).

Labour ex-councillors had spent more time on council duties per month (91 hours) than had Conservatives (72 hours). Members who had served on Labour-controlled councils spent more time per month on council business (90 hours) than did those who had served on Conservative councils (68 hours) or councils where there was no overall control (81 hours).

Ex-councillors who were in full- or part-time paid employment or were self-employed had spent an average of 64 or 63 hours per month on council business, while retired ex-councillors had spent an average of 82 hours per month on council activity. This is in accordance with the Widdicombe survey in 1985, which found that, on average, retired councillors devoted 19 hours per month more to council business than did those who were in paid employment.

The widely publicised growth of party politics in local government has been accompanied by a small increase from five to seven hours per month spent by the average councillor attending party group meetings. As shown earlier, this increase in the party politicisation of local government has been

accompanied by a reduction in the number of members who are elected as independents.

The amount of time spent on electors' problems and pressure groups also differed by type of authority, political balance and political party. Table 11 shows that councillors in metropolitan districts or Labour-controlled councils and Labour councillors spent more time per month dealing with electors' problems and pressure groups than did other councillors.

Table 11: Time spent on dealing with electors' problems and pressure groups by type of authority, political balance and political party

	base number: 519
	Average hours per month
Type of authority	
Metropolitan	23
London	15
District (elect whole council)	13
County	12
District (elect in thirds)	11
Political balance	
Labour	18
No overall control	13
Conservative	12
Political party	
Labour	17
Other	16
Conservative	11
Overall average	15

Summary

Ex-councillors did not differ much in their personal characteristics or councillor experience from those who were serving members when surveyed for the Widdicombe committee. There is still an over-representation of men, older people, self-employed people,

retired people, home-owners and married people.

Councillors spend a great deal of time on council activities. Almost all respondents had sat on at least one committee and sub-committee and most had held a council office during their last term and year of service. Councillors who had served in metropolitan districts, Labour-controlled authorities or were elected as Labour members spent, on average, more hours per month on council business than did others.

Councillor turnover was highest among those who had served one term or less in office. Also, although most ex-councillors held an office on the council during their last year and term of service, those who had served only one term were less likely to have held an office than those who had served for more than one term. This high turnover among new councillors and their replacement by another set of inexperienced new members has important implications for the management of local government.

References

1 Committee on the Management of Local Government, Volume 2, *The Local Government Councillor*, HMSO, 1967, p. 135.
2 Ibid., p. 246.
3 *Annual Abstract of Statistics 1991*, Central Statistics Office, HMSO, 1991.
4 Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Volume 2, *The Local Government Councillor*, HMSO, 1986, p. 21.
5 The source for the population estimates was the *General Household Survey*, 1988.
6 Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Volume 2, *The Local Government Councillor*, HMSO, 1986, p. 23.
7 Source: *General Household Survey*, 1988.
8 Source: *Population Trends*, 1991
9 Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Volume 2, *The Local Government Councillor*, HMSO, 1986, p. 22.
10 J. Stewart, *The Role of Councillors in the Management of Local Authorities*, Audit Commission, 1988, pp. 6-7.
11 Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Volume 2, *The Local Government Councillor*, HMSO, 1986, p. 42.

CHAPTER 2

THE TURNOVER OF COUNCILLORS

IN 1985 THE Widdicombe Committee estimated that around a third of councillors were leaving their councils at each election (1). There are broadly two groups of councillors who leave the job. The first are voluntary leavers, that is councillors who resign from office. The second group leave the council involuntarily: they are defeated at an election or are not re-selected by their party to stand.

Of the 519 ex-councillors who responded to the questionnaire, the majority (69 per cent) decided not to stand for re-election; 25 per cent were defeated, 4 per cent were not re-selected to stand and 2 per cent did not answer. Thus the overwhelming reason for the turnover of local authority councillors was personal choice - councillors had decided voluntarily that they no longer wished to participate in the management of local authorities.

This chapter examines the differences between those councillors who stood down and those who were either de-selected or not re-elected. For the purpose of this comparison, ex-councillors who left involuntarily are grouped together.

Personal characteristics

Among the ex-councillors who were either not re-elected or not re-selected, 50 per cent left the council having served one term or less; among those who stood down the proportion was 42 per cent (see Appendix 1, Table A7). In 1981 Rallings and Thrasher reported that more than a third of those who stood down had only served one term of office (2).

The proportions of ex-councillors who had been de-selected or not re-elected did not vary a great deal by age group. But age was influential among those who stood down. Those under 45 years old were most likely to have stood down (40 per cent), followed

by those aged 65 and over (26 per cent). Ex-councillors aged between 55 and 64 were the least inclined to stand down (14 per cent) (see Appendix 1, Table A8).

Table 12 shows a relationship between age and length of service among those who stood down: of those under 45 who resigned, nearly two-thirds did so after only one term or less as a councillor.

Table 12: Length of service by age of councillors who stood down at the last local election.

column percentages
base number: 350

	Under 45	*45 to 54*	*55 to 64*	*65 or more*
Length of service				
4 years or fewer	63	39	32	18
5 to 8 years	27	28	23	18
9 to 16 years	8	18	28	27
more than 16	1	14	17	37
Base number	*139*	*71*	*47*	*93*

Ex-councillors were asked whether any members of their household were children under school age or were attending school or full-time education. Given the age structure of councillors, it was not surprising that relatively small proportions had dependants, especially children under school age, in their household. Those with dependants were, however, much more likely to resign from the council.

In total, 10 per cent of all ex-councillors lived in households with children under school age and 29 per cent had children attending school or in full-time education. Of the ex-councillors with children under school age more than three-quarters stood down at the last local election, while 24 per cent left the council involuntarily. The same pattern was evident among ex-councillors with children attending school or in full-time education: almost three-quarters (74 per cent) stood down while around a quarter (26 per cent) were de-selected or not re-elected.

Political affiliation

There was little difference in the propensity of councillors to stand down by type of authority, although those in London were slightly more likely to have resigned from office and a higher proportion of those in districts where elections take place in thirds had either lost their seat or been de-selected at the last local elections (see Appendix 1, Table A9).

Of those who stood down, a higher proportion were from authorities where there was a Labour majority (40 per cent) than from those with a Conservative majority (28 per cent) and from those where there was no overall control (32 per cent).

Table 13 shows that a larger proportion of Labour councillors stood down than did Conservative or those with other political allegiances or none. The table also shows that fewer Labour candidates were defeated at the last local elections than were Conservative or other candidates. This was partly a reflection of the national trends and of the unpopularity of certain policies, especially the community charge. Although the numbers were small and must be interpreted with caution, Labour members were most likely to be de-selected by their party.

Table 13 Ex-councillors by party affiliation

column percentages
base number: 508

	Stood down	*Not re-elected*	*De-selected*
Conservative	36	49	19
Labour	42	19	81
Other	22	32	-
Base number	*357*	*130*	*21*

Councillor experience

There was virtually no difference between those who stood down and those who left the council involuntarily in terms of the hours they had spent on council duties, the council offices they had held during their last year or term of service or the number of committees or sub-committees sat on.

Both sets of ex-councillors were also alike in that they tended to be less active in their last year of office than they had been earlier. The patterns were similar, as shown in Table 14.

Table 14: Ex-councillors by offices held in their last term and year in office

column percentages
base number: 505

	Stood down	Not re-elected or de-selected
Last term in office		
Committee chair	29	25
Sub-committee chair	30	31
Group leader	6	12
Other group office holder	24	14
None of these	26	27
Last year in office		
Committee chair	19	18
Sub-committee chair	23	28
Group leader	4	10
Other group office holder	17	16
None of these	41	35

Summary

Turnover was affected by the number of dependants in a household and the related factors of age and length of service. On the whole there was little difference in either the personal characteristics or the experience while a councillor of those who stood down compared with those who were deselected or not re-elected.

References

1 Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Volume 1, *The Political Organisation of Local Authorities*, 1986, p. 49.

2 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'Disillusion, age and frustration - why councillors are calling it a day', *Local Government Chronicle*, 9 October 1981, pp. 1041-1042.

CHAPTER 3

WHY THE COUNCILLORS STOOD DOWN

THIS CHAPTER examines the reasons given by councillors who stood down at the last local election. The next chapter looks at a somewhat different question - what the former councillors felt about their experience of being on the council - and, since this was often linked to their reason for standing down, the subjects of this chapter and the following one inevitably overlap to some extent.

Ex-councillors who resigned before the last local elections were asked, in the format of an open-ended question, the reasons why they decided not to stand for re-election. The responses were grouped into five large categories: personal, competing demands, experiences as a councillor, eligibility and central-local relations. Each theme that occurred was coded once so each response could contain more than one code. The results are shown in Table 15. (The percentages add up to more than 100 because, although most people gave only one answer, some gave more than one.)

Table 15: Councillors who stood down by the reason(s) given for their decision.

column percentages
base number: 358

	row percentage
Personal reasons	28
Competing demands/commitments	42
Experiences as a councillor	26
Eligibility	13
Central-local relations	11

Personal reasons

The personal reasons for standing down included: ill health, age/ 'time for a younger person to take over' and length of service. The distribution was fairly even between these three categories and there was some overlap between them.

> I had served for 24 years and was over 70 and felt it was time for someone younger to represent my ward.

The findings are consistent with those of Rallings and Thrasher who found in their research, based on the 1981 county elections, that 34 per cent of councillors standing down gave personal reasons as one of the two most important factors influencing their decision (1).

Not surprisingly, older people more often gave personal reasons for standing down. Of those aged 65 and over, 67 per cent said this was why they stood down, compared with 39 per cent of those age 55 to 64, 11 per cent of those aged 45 to 54 and 7 per cent of those under 45 years.

Ex-councillors in London were less likely (14 per cent) than those in other types of authority, particularly counties (40 per cent), to give personal reasons for standing down. But, as Table 16 shows, a higher proportion of those who stood down in London were from the younger age groups and those in the counties were more likely to be aged 65 and over.

Table 16: Type of authority by age of councillors who stood down

column percentages
base number: 355

	Under 45	45 to 54	55 to 64	65 or more
County	11	11	22	30
London	33	28	20	10
Metropolitan	16	21	8	19
District (elect thirds)	18	21	27	19
District (elect whole)	21	19	22	22
Base number	*141*	*72*	*49*	*93*

Competing demands and commitments

The conflicting demands for councillors were work (or 'business') and family commitments. Work or business was the largest single reason given by ex-councillors for standing down (30 per cent). A smaller proportion (22 per cent) said their family was the reason or one of the reasons. Altogether 42 per cent cited family, work or both as the reasons for standing down.

Perhaps surprisingly, those who stood down because of other demands on their time were no less active as councillors during their last term, or in their last year of service, than other ex-councillors. There was little difference in the proportions holding a council office and the number of committees or sub-committees sat on (Appendix 1, Tables A10 and A11).

Many of those who were working or had family responsibilities or both found it hard to meet all the demands on their time. The points raised by ex-councillors about standing down because of competing demands included: the large amount of time taken up by council duties; the times of meetings; the attitude of employers; the effect on the businesses of self-employed councillors; lack of child-care facilities and adequate financial allowances, which made it hard to take unpaid leave from work.

As we have seen from the amount of time spent on a range of council duties (an average of 82 hours per month), being a councillor is a time-consuming job in itself, without additional demands.

> I found it difficult to fulfil the role in addition to working full-time.

Thus councillors felt they were unable to perform either their work or their councillor tasks effectively.

> My work restricted my council duties and vice versa. I felt I was doing neither properly.

Some ex-councillors resigned because they thought that their inability to perform work and councillor tasks properly was unfair to their associates.

> Due to the pressure of work I found it increasingly difficult to give as much time as I would have liked to my duties and felt this was not fair to the local electorate or other councillors and colleagues.

The times of council meetings made attendance difficult for those in full-time employment or those with child-care responsibilities. Daytime meetings meant that those in employment had difficulty attending, while evening meetings placed pressures on those with children. An ex-councillor from one district council wrote that:

> All the meetings were held at 2.30 pm and, being a barrister, it was not possible to guarantee attendance.

Another ex-councillor was refused any time off by his employer; this meant that he was unable to participate very fully in the running of the council. Many committee and sub-committee meetings are held during normal working hours, and this restricted the participation of those in full-time employment.

Many ex-councillors felt that being a councillor adversely affected their job opportunities and promotional prospects. One ex-councillor who was out of work at the time of the last local election decided to resign because of what he saw as a restriction on employment prospects. The research was unable to assess the attitudes of employers, but it is evident that many ex-councillors felt that they had sacrificed their career by being a councillor. One ex-metropolitan borough councillor interviewed summed up some of the conflicts.

> If you're in a full-time job, it's harder than it's ever been to get time off work. Employers are really beginning to question why you have to be off so much ... and it can be a drawback to your career as you are seen as a liability as an employee. It limits the sort of people who can come forward as councillors. I'm sure that's why there are so many retired and self-employed people because for most people who are employed in a 9 to 5 job it is very difficult.

Although self-employed people are over-represented in the councillor population compared with the population at large, self-employed people still faced conflicting demands on their time. Of the self-employed ex-councillors who stood down 40 per cent gave work or business commitments as a reason. The decision of self-employed people to resign was often expressed simply as "I needed to have more time for my business". It may be that, in a period of economic recession, self-employed people are likely to devote more time to their businesses.

As already noted, many ex-councillors found council service was disruptive to family life, especially in authorities where evening meetings were the norm.

> Being a London Borough councillor meetings took place in the evenings. This created far too great a level of disruption at home and meant I was either in from work at 6.00pm and out to a meeting by 6.45pm not returning until 1 or 2am or else having to spend hours at home preparing for a meeting or dealing with constituent problems. This extended over weekends as well. This places an intolerable burden on a family with children ... it is a miracle my marriage survived.

Councillors with young children faced special difficulties. Many found it hard and expensive to find adequate child care. Most councils do not provide child-care facilities or additional expensive allowances for child care during council meetings. This meant that councillors - usually the already under-represented women councillors - had to find, and pay for, alternative arrangements.

> It was extremely difficult to organise adequate and appropriate child care for my young son. The attendance allowance did not cover the cost of organising such child care. Further, meetings which extended through the afternoon, into the early evening (which most service committees did) meant that I often had to leave meetings to ferry my son from the daytime childminder to whoever would look after him.

If women are to be adequately represented on councils, the arrangements for child care will need to be addressed.

Experience as a councillor

Ex-councillors referred to a range of different experiences in their councillor role which caused them to stand down. These included what they saw as the powerlessness and frustration of being in opposition, conflict and bickering within party politics, lack of enjoyment or interest with the role, the self-interest of members, the politics of local government and the amount of time it took up. In total 26 per cent of those who stood down gave one or more of these reasons.

Differences in the proportions citing their experience as a councillor as their reason for standing down were related to the type of authority. Ex-county councillors were those least likely to give this reason (11 per cent) and those from the districts which elect in thirds were the most likely (35 per cent), followed by those who were councillors in London (32 per cent) (2).

A smaller proportion of ex-councillors from Labour-controllec authorities (20 per cent) than Conservative (31 per cent) or those where there was no overall control (30 per cent) gave experiences while a councillor as a reason for a standing down.

A smaller proportion of people aged 65 and over (13 per cent) gave their experience as a councillor as the reason for standing down than did younger age groups, though this is no doubt because age was a more obviously available reason. The proportions for the other age groups were: 28 per cent of those under 45, 38 per cent of those aged 45 to 54 and 33 per cent of those aged 55 to 64.

A higher proportion of ex-councillors who had served fewer than two terms (30 per cent) than those who had served for longer (20 per cent) gave experiences whilst a councillor as the reason for standing down.

The time-consuming nature of council duties and disillusionment with party politics were the reasons referred to most frequently. While most people mentioned the time taken on council duties in relation to the competing demands of family and

work, some ex-councillors found that the conduct of council business was itself simply too time-consuming.

It has been argued over the years that local government has become more 'party-politicised'. Party politics in local government had led some councillors to resign; one ex-councillor wrote:

> Party politics are tedious and irrelevant. Council and committee meetings would be shortened to half the time taken if all parties concentrated on representing the electors and not political parties.

Not only did party politics result in long meetings but, according to some ex-councillors, it also had an adverse effect on the running of the council.

> The party group was too concerned with petty 'in-fighting' and thus incompetent in office.

> Tired of internal party bickering ... the puerile party politicking leading to silly decisions and unnecessary conflicts was too much.

> Increased concern with the policies of my group and its effects on council's services to our citizens.

Ex-councillors who had represented the opposition party felt frustration at their lack of authority. As parties are represented on the committees and sub-committees of the council in proportion to their representation on the council, opposition councillors are always outnumbered when it comes to the vote. The following quotations illustrate the views of some opposition councillors.

> Frustration at inability to contribute effectively with important council decisions and policies.

> Frustration of being a member of a minority party with the consequent difficulties of getting things done.

Councillors in minority parties can find themselves unable to influence policy in a way which conflicts with the party political doctrine of the majority party because decisions are often made in group meetings and in some cases enforced through the whip system. It is not only opposition councillors who dislike this. As one ex-councillor from the controlling party stated:

> With the benefit of hindsight, and if it had been possible, I would have liked to be an 'independent'. The party system is too restrictive and narrow, you have to vote for things you sometimes disagree with.

A small proportion found the attitude of other councillors a deterrent to pursuing their councillor role in the way they would have liked. Some wrote that members were interested only in their own ends without regard for the public; others said that some councillors had an inflated sense of their own importance.

Eligibility

Eligibility reasons, given by some ex-councillors who would have been unable to stand for re-election, accounted for the retirement of 13 per cent.

Some councillors in Wales had been affected by the boundary review because (with the exception of Clwyd), the reforms in the electoral arrangements proposed by the Boundary Commission were implemented in Wales prior to the 1989 county elections. For some, the ward they represented disappeared. For others, the reorganisation of the electoral wards resulted in an increase in the size of the ward they represented, so they decided to stand down.

Some members were forced to stand down as a result of the 1989 Local Government and Housing Act (Part 1) which places restrictions on the political activities that certain local government employees are allowed to undertake (3). The restrictions include those at a certain level of seniority as local government officers and those in posts regarded as politically sensitive by the local authority. Those in politically restricted posts are not allowed to be councillors in another authority, or a Member of Parliament or a Member of the European Parliament.

Many of the ex-councillors in this study affected by the 1989 Act were forced to make choices that they resented. Most had to make their choice on economic grounds.

> I was hit by the Local Government Act ... Faced with giving up my job in local government or my political involvement, I felt angry at having to go.

One ex-councillor who was interviewed described the way in which the job that people on the cut-off grade (spinal point 44), the maximum level of seniority permitted, varied dramatically depending on the location of the authority. Due to the recruitment difficulties in the South of England people are employed on a higher grade than they would be elsewhere. Because of the legislation they are banned from political activity, even though they are in no way influential in the running of the council.

Central-local relations

The final set of reasons given by ex-councillors for standing down was what they saw as the erosion of local influence by central government or changes in central policy. 11 per cent of ex-councillors gave one or both of these as their reason for standing down.

Over the last few years central government policy initiatives have led to changes in local finance and service provision. A new system of finance was introduced in England and Wales in April 1990 (4) and under the 1989 Local Government Act compulsory tendering was introduced for a range of local government services previously supplied directly by the council (5).

Some ex-councillors described a steady reduction in the control of local authorities over their revenue finance and over their direct provision of local services. The result, they said, had been a change in the role of the councillor and in central-local relations. Ex-councillors complained of restrictions on their role by central government. This applied especially to ex-councillors in London and to those who were Labour party members.

Among ex-councillors in London 18 per cent gave central-local relations as a reason for standing down. This was more than those who had served in metropolitan districts (10 per cent), in districts which elect in thirds (10 per cent), in districts which elect the whole council (7 per cent) and in counties (6 per cent).

Although the political control of the authority did not affect people's propensity to give central-local relations as a reason for standing down, party allegiance was an influence. More Labour ex-councillors (17 per cent) than Conservative (5 per cent) or those who were elected on 'other' party or non-party tickets (8 per cent) said that central-local relations had led to their resignation.

Some ex-councillors expressed concern with central control over local expenditure and a general reduction in the influence of local government.

> The increasing central control of expenditure, capital and revenue, and interference in the operation of local government.

> Each year it became progressively more difficult to do the things which we knew needed doing because of our inability (due to government constraint) to manage our own affairs ... The frustration becomes unbearable.

As for central government policy, some councillors retired because they disagreed with policies and others because of policy changes which they felt inhibited their ability carry out their responsibilities adequately.

> Personal disagreement with certain government policies, eg housing, community charge, which it is the duty of the councillor to uphold.

> I was frustrated that, due to central government financial impositions on local government, I was no longer able to offer constituents basic commodities, eg a decent roof, a nursery place, adequate repairs.

Summary

The reasons given by those who stood down were in accordance with the findings of Rallings and Thrasher (6) and Maud (7). This survey shows that it is still difficult for local councils to retain younger members after they have experienced the demands of the role. Young people stand down after short periods of service because they cannot manage the additional responsibility alongside their work and family commitments.

References

1 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'Disillusion, age and frustration - why councillors are calling it a day', *Local Government Chronicle,* 9 October 1981, p. 1041.

2 The figures for ex-councillors from metropolitan districts was 23 per cent; it was 27 per cent for districts which elect the whole council.

3 See Local Government Information Unit, *The Local Government and Housing Act (Part 1)*, Special Briefing Number 30, January 1990.

4 See A. Bloch, *The Community Charge in England: Local Authority Experience*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1990.

5 See D. Parker, 'The 1988 Local Government Act and compulsory competitive tendering', *Urban Studies*, Vol 27, No. 5, 1990, pp. 653-668.

6 C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'Disillusion, age and frustration - why councillors are calling it a day', *Local Government Chronicle,* 9 October 1981, p. 1041.

7 Committee of Management of Local Government, Volume 2, *The Local Government Councillor*, HMSO, 1967, pp. 238-282.

CHAPTER 4

EXPERIENCE AND ATTITUDES OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS

EX-COUNCILLORS were invited to write about their experience as a councillor. The responses fit into five broad categories: some had a positive experience of council work; among those with a negative experience, some mentioned competing demands on time, some the impact of organisational changes, some a general frustration with local government, and some a lack of sympathy for the trends of the time (especially central-local relations).

Categories were of course closely connected to the reasons given by ex-councillors for standing down. Table 17 gives the frequency and proportion who gave each response. The total is more than 100 per cent because some councillors referred to more than one category.

Table 17: Ex-councillors by their experience on the council

base number: 519

	row percentages
Positive experience	37
Negative experiences	
Competing demands	29
Organisational change	13
Frustration	20
Lack of sympathy for broad trends	14

This chapter examines each category and relates the themes to the debate on the management of local government and the current discussion on policy matters.

Competing demands on time

There is little question that the role of the councillor is both complex and time-consuming. The reasons given by ex-councillors for standing down show that competing demands on time were most instrumental in their decision to resign. Many ex-councillors developed these themes and some offered possible solutions.

Some ex-councillors felt under pressure in their role as a representative of their constituents. Councillors spent an average of 15 hours per month dealing with electors' problems and pressure groups. But much of this activity was informal because a councillor is a public figure and expected to be available.

> People feel their councillor should be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

> I have been approached by irate members of the public while out with my dog. There is the expectation that immediate attention will be given in the street or on the doorstep.

The main problems faced by ex-councillors, however, were the constraints of time due to pressures of work and family combined with the usually large amount of time required for council business. The general view was that it is not possible to combine council, work and family and do all three effectively. As one young ex-councillor wrote:

> I ... admire councillors who manage to juggle council, work and family together, they must have more stamina than me.

The conflicts with family and working life arose because of the times of meetings and the reluctance of some employers to grant time off. These competing demands placed serious restrictions on people's ability to be a councillor.

> It is extremely difficult to be an effective councillor and work full-time and have a young family.

Working life

The times of full council and committee meetings, whether held during the day or in the evenings, presented difficulties for some councillors. Daytime meetings tended to interfere with working life while evening meetings impinged on the family. Maud found that the starting times of meetings were fairly evenly distributed between the daytime and evening: 23 per cent started before 2.00 pm, 21 per cent started between 2.00pm and 5.00pm, 17 per cent between 5.00pm and 6.30pm and 31 per cent started after 6.30pm (1).

To be an active member of a council requires participation in some daytime meetings. This places an element of dependence on employer attitudes among those in paid employment. Councillors thought that sympathy towards councillors' duties depended on the sector of employment.

> Local authority and public service employers are much more sympathetic to giving councillors time off for duties than private employers.

The amount of paid leave given to councillors from their employers varies and is dependent on the goodwill of an employer. Even where generous leave arrangements were granted, ex-councillors in paid employment still referred to the conflicting responsibilities of their paid work (which included inconveniencing colleagues) and their duties as a councillor.

Family life

Evening meetings combined with a full-time job put a great deal of pressure on those with families and with child-care responsibilities. One ex-metropolitan district councillor wrote:

> Our council/committee meetings were in the evenings so I was often missing from home from early morning till bedtime.

Some councillors also felt there was little support for those with child-care responsibilities.

> It is impossible to be a parent and a councillor. Both male and female colleagues on the council found this. Meetings are held at inconvenient times for parents and there is little support from other councillors, actually often hostility.

Women wrote about the disregard for those with caring commitments, demonstrated by the lack of crèche facilities or of additional finance for those who required the services of childminders during council meetings.

> I no longer wanted to be a councillor in an atmosphere unsupporting to working mothers. Child-care commitments were rarely taken into consideration when organising meetings. Most councillors with young children chose not to stand for re-election.

> It became increasingly difficult to attend meetings ... County Hall was 46 miles from my home. Crèche facilities were non-existent - most councillors had never heard of the word crèche.

> Very little support for women councillors - extra payment for baby-sitting or baby-sitters would be useful.

A study carried out by the Association of London Authorities in 1987 found that only two London authorities provided crèche facilities on a regular basis. This demonstrates the problems faced by those with children (2). One authority had daytime crèche facilities but this alleviated only half of the problem because there was no such arrangement for evening meetings.

The competing demands of work and family are influential in determining the sorts of people who can successfully participate in public service:

> The council is dominated by 'non-working' councillors and therefore does not represent a cross-section of the electorate.

Another ex-district councillor listed the councillors in his authority according to whether they were working. Thirteen were unemployed, 18 retired, 11 working full-time and six were self-employed. The over-representation of self-employed and retired people as councillors is symptomatic of the difficulties. As one ex-councillor said, "It's better to be male, married, self-employed or an old age pensioner".

The restrictions on the sorts of people who can be active in public service helps to explain the over-representation of retired people, self-employed and those not employed because they are the only ones who can participate with minimum disruption to their everyday lives. Barron and her colleagues found in their 1987 study that the retired and older married women had fewer barriers which restricted their involvement in local government (3). Thus statements by ex-councillors describing the role as impossible for anyone with a full-time job are in line with earlier research findings.

Many ex-councillors mentioned financial problems which complicate the juggling of work, family and councillor activities. In fact the need to spend time earning a living underlay many of the difficulties.

> The amount of hours required to do the job of councillor meant that, as a married woman with a family, relationships were stretched to breaking point. Having a full-time job didn't help. I am not middle class with a husband who can afford to keep me in idleness in the present economic climate.

> I could not afford either the time or the money to stand again unless I was retired or paid a salary.

The financial restrictions on people's ability to participate in local government mean that it is the domain of an unrepresentative minority. Young members and those in full-time employment are effectively excluded. As previously shown, turnover is highest, and the periods in office shortest, among younger people who are more likely to be in full-time employment. The high turnover after only a short period means that every four years a new set of

elected representatives have to begin the process of understanding the council.

> It is at least two years before any councillor has sufficient knowledge or experience to even contemplate opinions on important matters or making decisions which have far-reaching effects.

The competing demands on time that councillors have to contend with led to suggestions about possible organisational changes which would help relieve the situation.

Organisational changes

In the Consultation Paper *The Internal Management of Local Authorities in England* the Government stated that the aim was '... to ensure that local government attracts good councillors who can represent the electorate effectively' (4). With the shift of the council from a provider of services to an enabler, councillors need to be skilled at overseeing contractual arrangements.

Many people are excluded from participating in local government because of the demands of work and family, all of which are related to the necessity of paid employment. The possible solutions referred to most often by ex-councillors were greater remuneration, full-time paid councillors, more support services and a reduction in local authority business.

At present council membership is a voluntary service, although the system of remuneration ensures, in theory, that councillors do not suffer financial hardship as a result of their duties. The present system of members' allowances came into effect in April 1991 under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. The system sets a ceiling on the amount of remuneration that can be paid to councillors in each type of authority. The allowance is broken down into three parts: a basic allowance paid as a flat rate to all members, a special responsibility allowance payable to designated postholders and a discretionary attendance allowance (5).

Some suggested the system of remuneration does not meet the expenses incurred:

> Because they've changed the way expenses are paid, it costs you to be a councillor

Others suggested that remuneration had to be increased in order to attract people who would otherwise lose out financially:

> If it is appropriate for managers to be councillors clearly there should be a level of remuneration that would enable people to work fewer hours and not penalise their families in the process.

> Councillors are ... underpaid with regard to the amount of time and effort necessary to do the job properly.

> Total commitment requires almost full-time attendance. Therefore I feel the need to ... increase payments and allowances to attract younger councillors.

The appropriate level of remuneration for councillors is the key to establishing the role of the elected member and to the extent of local democracy. The Robinson Committee, which was concerned exclusively with the issue of remuneration, recognised this.

> We believe that it is absolutely fundamental to the effective working of local democracy that there should be no necessary impediment to the freedom of anyone to put themselves forward for election ... membership of local authorities should be truly open to all sectors of our society without fear that it will entail financial hardship (6).

This survey suggests that little has changed over the last 14 years to correct the distortions in representation caused by inadequate financial compensation. The government, in its consultation paper, suggested a number of alternatives to the present system of local government. The paper tentatively mentioned the idea of salaried councillors.

> In order to attract people of the right calibre ... there may be a case for reviewing whether such members should be on a salaried basis. In general, however, the Government believe that the tradition of voluntary service has served local government well in the past and should not be lightly overturned (7).

Some ex-councillors argued that the only solution to the competing demands faced by councillors and the inadequate representation of working people would be a system of full-time paid councillors. One ex-councillor wrote:

> Since taking early retirement in 1980 I seem to have been given posts that required daytime attendance ... surely this shows the case for full-time councillors, not to have to wait until one retires.

Others, however, expressed concern about the prospect of full-time councillors on two counts. First, such a system may discourage able people from standing because they would not give up their careers. Secondly in district authorities, with little responsibility over resources and not a heavy load of work, paid members were not necessary. But if the government proceeded with its proposal to restructure local government into unitary authorities this objection would become obsolete (8). The prevailing view among ex-councillors, however, was that a core of leading full-time councillors was needed to run each council.

In 1980, a Committee of Inquiry chaired by Sir Robert Thomas examined the support services available to councillors (9). They found that only a little help was available. For instance, 51 per cent of local authorities supplied headed stationery, 33 per cent offered secretarial services to all members, 25 per cent contributed towards the cost of the telephone and only 2 per cent issued filing cabinets for home use. The situation does not seem to have improved greatly over the last decade:

> If you wanted a letter done it would take at least a week in the system ... so I used to type things at home because it was so much quicker and easier.

> The lack of back-up (secretarial and administrative) was a serious handicap, particularly for someone in full-time work.

The other change suggested by the ex-councillors was a reduction in the amount of council business. Some ex-councillors thought that meetings were too regular and too long, while others thought that there were too many elected members.

> I found a considerable amount of sub-committee meetings a waste of time, the trivial items on the agenda could have been dealt with by officers.

> Too many councillors leads to protracted discussion/debate and excess administration costs.

As well as meetings, councillors were swamped with paperwork. The amount of reading necessary was described as 'overwhelming' and 'never-ending'. This suggests, along with the other evidence, that councillors need additional time, resources and support.

Frustration with local government

One fifth of all ex-councillors expressed frustration with the council. Areas of discontent included the excessively political nature of local government and a feeling of powerlessness among those in opposition.

Surprisingly the proportion who expressed frustration with the council did not vary according to whether the ex-councillor had left the council voluntarily or involuntarily.

The first area of grievance was the political nature of local government. The Audit Commission recognised that the role of the politician provides a platform for gaining publicity for all sorts of issues, some of which may be unrelated to local affairs (10). Some ex-councillors thought that the system had adverse effects on the local electorate and on the sound management of councils:

> Council's activities were based on party political dogma, rather than the needs of the voters.

> On many committees the level of debate was low and politics seemed to prevail too much in many aspects of running the council.

> I felt that being a councillor was about making common sense decisions to benefit the community not about party and faction politics.

Some ex-councillors thought that the party system, although a long-standing feature of local government, was too prevalent. They resented the way in which national politics interfered with local decision-making:

> Local councils are now dominated by 'professional' politicians, in the case of some parties dominated by national rather than local issues.

> Good councillors often lose elections. Bad ones are re-elected as national trends influence votes. A great deal of talent is lost due to politics.

The dominance of party also meant that the whip system was used in some authorities to ensure that group members voted for party policy. For some councillors this lack of freedom to vote personally rather than with the party was unacceptable.

> The party system is too restrictive and narrow. You have to vote for things you sometimes disagree with.

> Perhaps the most annoying and disappointing side was the behaviour of the main political groups in local issues and debates and the use of the whip to attain the wishes of a few against the majority.

Many ex-councillors also felt a sense of frustration because of their powerlessness as members of the minority group on the council. It is recognised that council meetings are increasingly a matter of formal procedure in majority-controlled authorities because decisions are made elsewhere (11).

> Among opposition councillors, like myself, a factor pushing people out of council politics is the continuous frustration of being excluded from power, never getting business through committee or Council, winning the argument but never the vote.

> Wherever there is a political majority it amounts to a secret society as all matters are discussed and settled at group level.

Lack of sympathy for broad trends

Some ex-councillors mentioned changes in central governmen policy that had led to a reduction in the autonomy and status o local government and its councillors. This ties in with the changes in central-local relations cited by some ex-councillors as their reason for standing down. A higher proportion of Labour ex-councillors (26 per cent) than Conservative (6 per cent) referred unprompted to what they saw as a shift in the relationship between central and local government.

One theme was increased central control over local government. This included finance, the provision of services and a general increase in central interference at the expense of locally-based concerns.

> Increasing central controls on the local council's ability to decide for itself how best to meet the needs of local people and how much money is required to do that ultimately makes a nonsense of the role of the councillor.

> Since the last general election local government is under attack and being taken over by central government and local services are being destroyed by compulsory competitive tendering -

> commercialism is taking over. I should be very uneasy to be involved in destroying what I consider to be real local government, ie the provision of municipal services.

Some ex-councillors thought that there had been a decline in the status of local government. Some thought this was demonstrated by a lack of understanding of the role of the councillor, while others attributed it to the absence of adequate remuneration.

> The prestige of being a local councillor has declined over the past 15 years and the work entailed is misunderstood by many amongst the electorate.

> I believe that the political parties and society should show greater appreciation for the work done by councillors, eg by introducing a more generous system of financial remuneration.

A linked point was what was perceived as the inability for local councillors to decide what resources were necessary to carry out the functions of local government. Ex-councillors expressed regret at having to make cuts in services and others refused to support such measures, choosing to resign instead. The reality for constituent councillors was described by an ex-district councillor:

> The lasting memory will be one of frustration at being unable to help many deserving constituents because of the lack of resources within the council.

Positive experience

However, in spite of the frustrations experienced by many ex-councillors a large proportion (37 per cent) wrote, unprompted, that being a councillor had been a positive experience.

The two things that satisfied ex-councillors most while in office were their ability to help constituents and their opportunity to learn.

> I thoroughly enjoyed helping my constituents and working hard to ensure that their complaints and concerns were investigated - and usually eradicated.

On the positive side, an invaluable insight into the management of scarce resources.

An excellent experience which has taught me an awful lot.

Summary

It is clearly difficult for councillors, particularly those with jobs and those with dependants, to participate in the running of local government. Levels of remuneration, the times of meetings and the lack of support facilities all make it difficult for the full spectrum of society to be represented among local councillors.

Ex-councillors suggested organisational changes that could increase the accessibility of the job of councillor to wider sections of society. The recommendations included a reduction in council business, increased financial allowances, increased support services and the introduction of full-time salaried councillors.

In spite of the frustration expressed with local councils and the changes in central policy, a large proportion still said something positive about their experience as a local authority councillor.

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10 Audit Commission, 'We can't go on meeting like this: The changing role of local authority members', *Audit Commission Management Paper 8*, September 1991.
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CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

THIS CHAPTER outlines the main findings of the survey and examines their implications for representative local government. It also considers organisational changes that could help to alleviate the high turnover and the under-representation of large sections of the population.

Principal findings

The main reason for the turnover of local councillors was voluntary: councillors were no longer prepared to serve. The most frequent explanations for standing down were personal reasons (age, length of service and ill-health) and the competing demands of work and family.

The tendency of councillors, particularly those who were under 45, was to leave after a short period in office. Councillors become more involved in council activities after their first term because they then more often hold an office as a committee chair or the like. The rapid turnover among those who serve only one term means that a wealth of recently acquired experience is lost at each local election. It also means that a large number of members are unfamiliar with the system they are required to operate.

Ex-councillors who stood down were more likely to be younger and have dependent children than those who were not re-elected or de-selected. There was, however, little difference in the extent of their participation on the council when they were members between those who resigned and those who left involuntarily. A similar number of hours was spent on council business, around the same number of committees and sub-committees were sat on and similar proportions of people held a council office during their last term and year of service.

Organisational changes

The main barriers preventing the adequate representation of all sections of the population on local councils were the competing

demands of work and family, which were heightened by insufficient financial remuneration. Councillors who were also in full-time employment found it difficult to combine their work and council business. Daytime meetings interfered with working hours and employers, especially those in the private sector, were not always sympathetic to councillor activities. Those who were in full-time employment and had families found the pressures especially difficult.

People with child-care responsibilities, usually women, found that the lack of crèche facilities and of financial compensation made things more difficult. This was especially apparent for those who needed to attend meetings in the evening. If women are to be adequately represented on local councils, child-care provision needs to be improved.

Ex-councillors made many suggestions about the organisation of the management of local government. If the councillor role is to be open to everyone, they said, the barriers to participation must be removed. Suggestions included salaried members, particularly in the larger unitary authorities, increased support services and a reduction in council business.

The question of salaried members has been on the agenda for some time. The government is reluctant to implement such a reform as it would undermine the concept of voluntary public service. This concept compromises the idea of local democracy in practice, however, because it excludes many people from participation in the affairs of local government.

The Widdicombe survey in 1985 found considerable support for a 'salary equivalent' for leading members, particularly those serving on larger authorities (1). This would mean that those who were essentially managing the authority would be able to pursue their service full-time while the majority of councillors would still be voluntary, with perhaps more adequate financial remuneration. It is recognised however, that a system of sabbatical time from employment may be difficult to implement.

To attract a wider range of people to local government the role has to be made less time-consuming. This could be done by a substantial increase in support services, which at present are largely the domain of the leading members, and a reduction in

council business by using measures such as a time limit on meetings to shorten debates.

Central-local relations

Over the last decade there have been many changes in the role of local government and its relationship with central government. If central government is going to succeed in its objective of attracting the right 'calibre' of people to local government then recent policy initiatives need to be reconsidered in order to reduce some of the misgivings expressed about the changing councillor role.

Local government control over its own revenue finance has declined over the last few years. In 1989/90, prior to the introduction of the poll tax, local councils in England and Wales controlled, on average, nearly two-thirds of their revenue finance. With the introduction of the poll tax this declined in 1990/91 to just over one-third and this has been subsequently reduced to one-seventh. This means that local councils are more dependent on central government for finance, which means a reduction in the autonomy and status of local government and of local councillors.

The role of local government in the provision of services has also changed. Many local services are now subject to compulsory competitive tendering, and this means that the job of the council is increasingly changing from that of being from a provider to being an enabler. All this has led to a change in the role of the councillor and, linked to the reduction in financial autonomy, has resulted in a reduction in the scope of local councils and their members.

The results of this survey must, however, be set in the perspective of the wider programme of the Local and Central Government Relations Research Committee, of which this study is a part. This emphasises the interrelated problems of defining the functions of local government, of determining its structure, and of finding an appropriate means for its finance. The ameliorative measures suggested earlier (such as remuneration, more child care or shorter meetings) are relative to the recent experience of function, structure and finance. But they are likely to prove

inadequate unless the deeper problems of function, structure and finance are also addressed (2).

References

1 Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Volume 1, *The Political Organisation of Local Authorities*, 1986.

2 These matters are discussed in *A New Accord: Promoting constructive relations between central and local government*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1992.

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL TABLES

Table A1: Councillors by the number of committees and sub-committees (if any) served on

column percentages
base number: 519

	Committees	*Sub-committees*
None	3	13
1 to 2	43	33
3 to 4	43	29
5 or more	10	23
Not answered	2	2

Table A2: Council offices held during last year of office by sex

column percentages
base number: 519

	Men	*Women*	*All*
Leader of the council	2	-	1
Chair/mayor of the council	2	1	2
Committee chair	19	20	19
Sub-committee chair	25	24	25
Group leader	7	2	6
Other group office holder	16	18	16
Any other/s	17	20	18
None of these	40	36	39

Table A3: Council offices held during last term of office by sex

column percentages
base number: 516

	Men	*Women*	*All*
Leader of the council	3	-	2
Chair/mayor of the council	5	4	5
Committee chair	29	28	28
Sub-committee chair	30	30	30
Group leader	10	3	8
Other group office holder	21	19	21
Any other/s	18	25	20
None of these	25	27	26

Table A4: Council offices held during last year of office by age

column percentages
base number: 516

	Under 45	*45-54*	*55-64*	*65 or over*	*All*
Leader of the council	-	-	3	2	1
Chair/mayor of the council	-	3	2	2	2
Committee chair	16	18	23	22	19
Sub-committee chair	22	19	30	29	25
Group leader	4	4	14	5	6
Other group office holder	22	17	14	10	16
Any other/s	20	14	19	19	18
None of these	42	42	33	37	39

Table A5: Council offices held during last term of office by age

column percentages
base number: 516

	Under 45	*45-54*	*55-64*	*65 or over*	*All*
Leader of the council	1	-	3	4	2
Chair/mayor of the council	2	3	7	9	5
Committee chair	30	31	24	27	29
Sub-committee chair	33	27	29	31	31
Group leader	6	9	15	6	8
Other group office holder	34	17	12	12	21
Any other/s	25	15	22	17	20
None of these	21	34	27	27	26

Table A6: Council offices held during last year of office by length of service

column percentages
base number: 506

	4 years or less	*5 to 8 years*	*9 to 16 years*	*More than 16 years*	*All*
Leader of the council	-	2	-	5	1
Chair/mayor	-	2	-	6	2
Committee chair	12	19	28	32	20
Sub-committee chair	20	20	33	35	25
Group leader	4	7	7	10	6
Other group office holder	16	20	20	10	17
Any other/s*	17	16	19	21	18
None of these	47	41	28	26	39

Table A7: Reasons for becoming an ex-councillor by length of service

column percentages
base number: 499

	Stood down	*Not re-elected or not re-selected*
Length of service		
4 years or less	42	50
5 to 8 years	24	16
9 to 16 years	18	19
More than 16	16	14
Base number	*352*	*147*

Table A8: Reasons for becoming an ex-councillor by age

column percentages
base number: 505

	Stood down	*Not re-elected or not re-selected*
Age		
Less than 45	40	27
45 to 54	20	26
55-64	14	24
65 or over	26	23
Base number	*355*	*150*

Table A9: Ex-councillors by the type of authority

column percentages
base number: 513

	Stood down	*Not re-elected or not re-selected*
Type of authority		
County	17	18
London	24	18
Metropolitan	17	20
District (elect one-third of) the council	20	25
District (elect whole council)	21	18
Base number	*358*	*155*

Table A10: All ex-councillors who stood down by the number of committees and sub-committees sat on

column percentages
base number: 358

	Committees	*Sub-committees*
None	3	14
1 to 2	47	33
3 to 4	40	51
5 or more	8	-
Not answered	1	1

Table A11: Ex-councillors who gave competing time commitments as their reason for standing down by the number of committees and sub-committees sat on

column percentages
base number:150

	Committees	*Sub-committees*
None	3	15
1 to 2	52	34
3 to 4	38	51
5 or more	6	-
Not answered	1	1

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THE TURNOVER OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS

Alice Bloch

The skills required to be an effective local councillor are complex and demanding. And it seems that more and more local councillors are standing down, some after only a short time in office. Councillors resign from the job just as they become experienced, only to be replaced by a new group of inexperienced novices.

What makes councillors decide they no longer want to participate in the running of local government? In this study, Alice Bloch analyses the reasons behind this pattern and looks at the important implications it has for the representation of the electorate and the management of local authority business.

Using data from a survey of former councillors, this study aims to find out the reasons for the turnover of local authority councillors in England and Wales. Alice Bloch considers the characteristics and working experience of ex-councillors, the rate of turnover, why they stood down and their attitudes to the role they played in local government. The survey covered a spread of different types of authority and political control.

This study was undertaken as part of the research programme of the Local and Central Government Relations Research Committee of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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